

Review Copy
Chapter 4
The Fastest Path

PERSONAL AGILITY

Double Your Impact.
Perform with Precision



PETER STEVENS and MARIA MATARELLI

Review Copy



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Please share your feedback by

March 24, 2019

so we can incorporate your thoughts in
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By Peter Stevens and Maria Matarelli

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Chapter 4: The Fastest Path

“Doing more than one thing at a time makes you slower and worse at both tasks.”

— **Jeff Sutherland**

Key concepts

- Staying on track with your goals
- Recognizing what’s slowing you down
- Multitasking
- Beating procrastination
- Staying in flow

“If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there.”

— **Lewis Carroll**

“Are we there yet?” If you are a parent, this question probably resonates with you from some trip you took when your kids were small. When you are striving to achieve your major goals, how do you know that you are on track? How do you know that you are making progress? And what do you do, when the motor doesn’t want to engage?

If you are driving to grandma’s, it’s clear that you’re making progress and when you have arrived: On the way you can look out the window and see the ground zipping by. When you arrive, you recognize the front door. And if you miss a turn, the road signs warn you that you are not going where you thought.

As a GPS Navigator for your life, Personal Agility helps you identify your priorities and recognize when you are getting off course or hitting strong headwinds. Interruptions and distractions are like crosswinds: they blow you off course, but you have to deal with them. Doing too many things at once, otherwise known as multitasking, uses up your energy, slows you down, and lowers your output, maybe even to the point where you get nothing done at all.

And procrastination is like having the gear in neutral -- the engine is making a lot of noise but you are not moving.

When you first apply Personal Agility in your life, you learn to make use of the *Priorities Map* so you are clear on what matters, what's important to get done, what's urgent, what you plan to do for the week, and what is the one task you need to focus on for the day. We also discussed how to celebrate your achievements on a weekly basis. Getting into a rhythm or flow can really accelerate you toward achieving your goals.

"One thing that really became clear, was this strong intertwining of things. Priorities and things that matter to you, those things are never just siloed. They don't stand alone. So, your thinking switches between those things all the time. Personal Agility helped me stop thinking about other things, but look at my life, and focus on the task at hand. And when it is done, it is done!"

– Hartmuth G. (Bern, Switzerland)

In this chapter, we'll look at how Personal Agility helps you recognize and recover from each of these challenges so you can achieve your goals as quickly and effectively as possible.

I – How do you stay on track with your goals?

"I want to end each week with satisfaction and start each week with confidence."

– Walter Stulzer

Have you ever thought about starting your own business? Or considered climbing Mt. Everest? At some point your wishful dream becomes a concrete goal. What do you need to do to accomplish that goal?

Let's take a concrete example: starting your own business. There is the administrative side, like incorporation, founders' agreements, business and tax registration. Then there is the market side, looking at who your customers are and how they will buy from you. How do you confirm that there is enough business to do that full time? What about financing? How much money do you need? Where are you going to get it? It can be a long road, and especially if you also have a day job, you may be limited in how much time you can invest in your new business. So the end goal is potentially far away.

What could prevent you from achieving your long term goals? The top reasons we usually hear are: Not spending time on it, letting other things always take higher priority, losing focus, putting others in front of yourself, and not believing that your goal is actually achievable.

The most frequent case is spending your time on something else. So the key to achieving your goals is recognizing when you are off track when you are not working toward your goal as much as you need to or want to so that you can make a change and begin working toward them again.

Getting things done requires focus: finish one thing before you move on to the next. And to start you need to know what that *one thing* is. Every time you spend an hour doing something that doesn't really matter, that is an hour you could have been spending toward reaching your goals.

You might be focused on improving your health, but when you reflect on your day, you realize you didn't get your workout in, "I wanted to go to the gym, but I had to run some errands and ran out of time." You may want to start your dream business but can't seem to take the first step. "I would like to have my own business, but I can't afford to miss a paycheck, so I spend all my time at work and my business idea never gets off the ground." These things may all be true. And they could also be excuses.

Urgent things are about keeping the boat from sinking. Important things are about reaching your ultimate destination. If you never

spend any time on important things, when will you do them? What happens when you use your time to do things that don't matter as much to you?

Remember, you are the captain of your boat. You set the course. If you get caught in a storm, you can't let the boat sink. Urgent things tend to push important things out of the way. Did you really "have" to do those errands at that moment? Do you really want to go to the gym? If it's truly important, you will find a way!

Remember to always be kind to yourself. You, like everyone else, are doing the best that you can given the situation at hand.

To stay on track, you first need to be able to recognize when you are getting off track and why. Your weekly Celebrate and Choose event combined with reviewing the Breadcrumb Trail help you do this. If you see too many things in the Done column that don't serve your most important goals, or if during the week you added too many things, these could be signs that you are drifting off course, because you are not doing what serves your goals.

II – Interruptions, distractions, and how to deal with them

When was the last time you set out to do something only to be interrupted by a phone call or instant message? Your son needs help with his homework, or your manager needs you to deal with an emergency... Interruptions are a fact of life. Every time you open Facebook or pick up your phone, you are confronted by dozens of messages and notifications that all say, "Click me!" How can you get anything done with all this noise? And if you do get distracted, how do you get back on track?

Interruptions come in many flavors. Some are important, some are urgent, and some are a waste of time.

What if the interruption is important? If you find that you need to do something different than what you initially chose, if you decide that it is important enough and urgent enough to do right away, it's okay to do it. You get to decide what matters, and you get to change

your mind when the situation changes. The choices you made at the beginning of the week set your intentions for the week, and when you get distracted, this is what you come back to. But life happens faster than you can plan, and when it does, decide what's best to do, and update your Priorities Map accordingly.

What happens if you get distracted and click on one of those tempting notifications on Facebook or your smartphone? This may be a sign that you need to take a break. It's hard to focus when you're tired. So take a break if you need one, and when you are ready to start work again, go back to the top item in your "This Week" column of your Priorities Map. (It can also be helpful to set your phone on airplane mode, install an adblocker, turn off notifications, or otherwise turn down the noise coming from your devices.)

What if someone comes to you with a request that is urgent, but not important enough to do right away? Does being urgent also make it important? Not necessarily. Will it sink your boat? You get to make the call if it is important enough to justify doing it anyway.

Another alternative is to simply tell them you'll add it to your to do list and put it on your Priorities Map or even your Forces Map. Whether you put it high or low on the list depends on how important you think it is or how soon you want to work on it.

You might even just say no. You'd like to help, but if it doesn't align with what really matters to you, then you are "unlikely" to get to it soon. If you do make time for something new then it will take time away from what is really important to you. Whether you realize it or not, your ship is changing course. Do you want to go there?

Knowing what really matters enables you to explain why you said no. "Yes, I'd like to help you with ABC, but I am committed to XYZ goal. Working on ABC would slow my progress on XYZ and I won't be able to both work on ABC and get XYZ completed in time."

You don't have to say "yes" to everything. Just because someone asked you to do something, that doesn't mean you have to do it. If

you have personal goals, it is okay to prioritize yourself and what is important to *you*. Quality of life is also important.

The Priorities Map makes it easy to recognize what you want to be doing. Whenever you get distracted, go back to the top item of “This Week” in your Priorities Map. When you finish an item, move it to Done, and go on to the next item on the list.

As you move forward, remember to be nice to yourself. The items you put in the “This Week” column don’t represent a plan or a commitment, they represent the course you have set for the week. Life often happens faster than you can plan. Your next Celebrate and Choose event is an opportunity to celebrate that your boat hasn’t sunk and to stop and reflect on where you’re heading. This gives you space for noticing whether you are really doing the things you want to be doing. If you get blown off course, use your Priorities Map to recognize that, then reset your course toward your goal.

When you find that you have done something unexpected, i.e. something that was not on your Priorities Map, just write it down and put it in the “Done this week” column. This makes it visible so you can acknowledge that a) you decided that something was important, and b) you got it done. You can reflect later on whether you would like to decide differently the next time that happens.

When you get to your weekly Celebrate and Choose event, celebrate what you achieved even the things that were not in your “This Week” column at the start of the week.

III – Multitasking takes longer

“Most of the time multitasking is an illusion. You think you are multitasking but in reality, you’re actually wasting time switching from one task to another.”

– Bosco Tjan

How many projects are you working on right now? Do you believe that juggling multiple things at once is a valuable skill? Is working on multiple projects simultaneously good for your performance, or detrimental?

When you divide your time between multiple activities, this is called multitasking. Multitasking dramatically reduces the amount of time you have available to work on each individual goal. Harvard Business Review author Peter Bergman reported that multitasking leads to as much as a 40% drop in productivity.¹

When too many things matter, nothing matters. If you are working on too many things, then you risk not completing anything.

The Impact of Multitasking

“In today’s fast-paced, knowledge-based business world, it’s not uncommon to see project managers juggling as many as 10 IT projects simultaneously—with all types of complexities, durations, and sizes.”

– Jason Charvat²

How much does multitasking slow you down? If a project by itself takes one week but you have two projects to do simultaneously, what is the expense of switching back and forth between them?

¹ Bergman, P. (2010, May 20). How (and why) to stop multitasking. [Harvard Business Review](#).

² Charvat, J. (2003, Feb 20), How to manage multiple IT projects, Tech Republic

Working on two projects at the same time instead of one will reduce your speed by at least 50%. You will need at least twice as long to complete either project.

How much impact does multitasking have on your performance? There are two ways to look at this. The first way is how fast are you? How long does it take you to get one task done? The other way is to look at how much work you can get done over a certain period of time, say a month or a year. Regardless of how you look at it, multitasking is bad for your performance. The more you multitask, the more dramatically your ability to get things done declines. People may perceive that you are slow and ineffective, even though you are working very hard toward achieving your goals.

Number of Projects in Parallel	Relative Speed	Time to complete a one-week project
1	5x	1 week
2	2.5x	2 weeks
3	1.67x	3 weeks
4	1.25x	4 weeks
5	1x	5 weeks

effects of multitasking
not including switching costs

Dramatic as these slow-downs are, they are actually quite optimistic because they do not take into account the waste and cost of switching tasks.

The Cost of Multitasking

Research by Gerald Weinberg shows that if you are switching between two tasks, 20% of your time is lost to switching costs.³ For each additional task you try to accomplish in parallel, you lose another 20%. By the time you have 5 projects going at once, you are losing around 75% of your total capacity. So not only have you reduced the time available to each project from 100% down to 20% of your time, you have wasted 3/4 of that time on switching costs so you only have 5% of your time available for real work on each task. It could take you 5 or 6 months to do what you could have done in a week! (See table/figure below)

Number of Projects in Parallel	Wasted time and energy to context switching	Relative Speed	Time to complete a one-week project
1	0%	20x faster	1 week
2	20%	8x	2½ weeks
3	40%	4x	5 weeks
4	60%	2x	10 weeks
5	75%	1x	20 weeks

effects of multitasking
including switching costs

If you are doing 5 things at once, you are wasting 75% of your time on task switching. Every time you reduce the number of tasks you are multitasking by 1, you double the rate at which you get things done.

³ Gerald Weinberg, Weinberg, Gerald M. Quality Software Management (New York: Dorset House, 1991).

“We had 30 initiatives to improve the company and 30 people to implement them. In two years, none of them got done.”
– **Walter Stulzer, Zurich**

Many articles have been written to explain why switching costs are so high. They tend to focus on the brain and how switching from one task to another can be expensive. When you change tasks, how long does it take you to get back in the flow? Oddly enough, some kinds of task switching are very expensive while others are quite easy to do. Context switching alone doesn't seem to explain why the cost increases so dramatically with the number of tasks to perform in parallel.

Based on our experience and the reports of our users, we believe there is another explanation. Multitasking introduces a new activity: Deciding what to work on next. The more tasks you have to choose from, the harder it is to choose, and the harder it is to make that decision stick. We call this analysis paralysis.

The more people are involved in this decision-making process, the more effort will be needed to make these decisions. The process of negotiating and renegotiating the priorities involving multiple stakeholders can be time consuming, expensive, and subject to frequent revision. This can easily account for the loss of 75% of a person's productive capacity when working on five projects at once.

The Challenge of Multitasking

Walter Stulzer, Executive Director of Futureworks explained how multitasking challenged leadership's efforts to improve the company:

“We started trying to reinvent the company about three years ago. We had many ideas for improving the company, so we started implementing them... all of them... in parallel. The problem was that we had as many initiatives as people, so we struggled to make progress on any of them. Our slow progress was compounded by a lack of clarity and focus. We started things without being clear on

what we were really trying to accomplish. So we changed our minds a lot, and each change meant a delay in getting that measure completed.

After 2 years of no progress, we restarted the initiative as one project that focused on a few small, well-defined goals at a time. Every three weeks or so, my management and I got together to review what we had accomplished in the previous round, and to decide what we wanted to accomplish in the next round. Each of these goals had to be doable within the three weeks. We got clear on what we were trying to achieve with each measure. We never took on more than what we thought possible in that time. We continued like this. Every three weeks, we reviewed what we had accomplished, and re-evaluated what we needed to accomplish in the next round.

Six months later, we had accomplished everything that needed to be done to achieve our initial goals. I barely recognize the company from a year ago! Half of our initial ideas proved not to be necessary, so we didn't do them. By focusing on a small number of achievable goals in a short time-frame, and by committing to getting them done in that time-frame, we were able to achieve all our goals with half the work in one quarter of the time. And the results are already visible in our finances!”

If you have too many things on your plate, this is also a form of multitasking. Each task you think about doing is competing for your attention of what to work on next. As you spread yourself thinner and thinner by jumping from one task to the next, your rate of completion slows down. The more choices you have, the harder it is to decide what really matters, and the harder it is to make your decision stick on what to work on. You pay the price of multitasking.

If multitasking is bad for performance, why has it become such a way of life? When we look at the number of simultaneous projects people are expected to complete at work, it seems like there is no choice but to say yes to everything that is demanded of them.

In general, when we talk to people about multitasking, the discussion seems to quickly push people out of their comfort zone. Modern technology has given us the ability to multitask more than ever before. It has become expected. Focus has become old-fashioned and multitasking has become the only way forward.

Yes, and.... Change is easy if you want to do it. It's very difficult if you don't want to do it. So like losing weight, the first step is to believe that you can do it, and the second step is to decide that you want to do it, then begin to take action.

Admittedly, it might not be possible to get rid of multitasking entirely, nor is it even clear that you would want to. Multitasking is like weeds in the garden. If you have too many weeds, you don't get any tomatoes, so you will have to pull the weeds from time to time. But no matter how much weeding you do, they will always come back, and you will have to go weeding again next week. So the question is not how to eliminate multitasking, but how to prevent it from dominating our lives to the point that we get no work done.

What would happen if you could reduce your multitasking just a bit? Instead of five items that really matter, reduce the number of things you are doing in parallel to just four. Experience (and the math) suggests this could cut in half the time you need to accomplish your goal!

How Can You Reduce the Impact of Multitasking?

"Clarity brings speed."

– **Maria Matarelli**

Many of our practitioners have experienced periods where they "fly through their 'This Week' column!" How do they do it? They take the first task, then finish it. Then they take the next task (top of the "This Week" column), finish it, then go on to the next. The decision about what to do next is easy because they already made that decision during their last Celebrate and Choose event.

Limit the number of things you could work on, so it's easier to choose what to do next. You can achieve this by limiting the number of items in "What Really Matters" to three, maybe four items and by limiting how many items you put in the "Possibilities" column.

Last but not least, focus on getting things done. The more things you have in progress, the more multitasking you are doing. So before you start working on another card, ask yourself what could you do to get the first card done.

Here are our top tips for reducing the impact of multitasking:

- Strive to finish things before starting new things
- Make it easy to remember what you want to return to if you are interrupted by using your Priorities Map
- Make it easy to identify what you want to work on next when you finish something by prioritizing what's on your Priorities Map
- Limit the number of tasks in your Possibilities column (use the Forces Map for longer term planning)
- Reserve time on your calendar to work on important items
- Hang a do not disturb sign on the door
- Turn off notifications, put your phone in airplane mode or turn it off completely
- Close programs on your computer that you don't need for the task at hand, especially email, messaging and social media
- Uninstall apps from your phone that are constantly distracting you
- Ask someone for help to finish something you are struggling to complete

The Priorities Map is designed to help you visualize what to work on next to stay aligned with your goals. The other tips are things that have worked for us.

IV - Beating procrastination

"If it weren't for the last minute, nothing would get done."

– Rita Mae Brown

Have you ever had a goal for the day or something important that you wanted to do but something kept getting in the way? You keep finding something else to do. You can't resist the temptations of social media, news sites and responding to notifications. You feel bad about not working on it. People are nagging you to do it. But somehow, you don't know where to start.

Procrastination is when you know what you need to do but you don't do it. You want to go the gym, but you find yourself cleaning the house, replying to several emails, reading all the comments on the latest news articles, getting lost watching suggested videos on youtube. You find yourself doing everything but what you set out to do. You may even be very productive... on other things, but not the important things.

Procrastination is trying to tell you something. It could be as simple as you need some rest. Often it is about fear. You could be worried about what happens if you fail, or if you succeed, or if you make the wrong choice, or even if you make any choice!

When you find yourself procrastinating, the first step is be aware that you are stuck. Personal Agility helps you do this, because the important card - the one you're procrastinating on - doesn't move. So if you see these symptoms, ask yourself, "Am I procrastinating? Do I want to get this done? Why am I putting this off?"

The next step is to figure out why you are stuck. If you know what the problem is, you can do something about it. What comes next depends on the reason.

The coaching approach of asking yourself powerful questions to help you understand the problem can be helpful. Let's look at some possibilities:

How is your energy level? You might just be tired from too long a work session or pushing yourself too hard over a longer time period -- time for a coffee break. It's okay to take a break, rest or relax. Your body needs rest. You can ignore that for a while, but the longer you resist the need for rest or sleep, the longer your body will need to recover.

What's the big deal? Sometimes, when you actually sit down and complete the task, you find that it wasn't nearly as difficult as you thought it would be.

What will happen if you do it? And then what happens? Very often, a deeper fear is the reason for not doing something. Often people talk about the fear of failure. What happens if you fail in your attempt? This might explain some cases, but we sometimes fear of success can be equally paralyzing.

What will happen if you succeed? If you fail in an endeavor, you will basically stay where you are. No change in your situation. If you succeed, you might become famous, get a promotion or a pay raise, get more attention, etc. But how will your friends and colleagues react? How does success fit with your self image? Success can change your status. Maybe it could lead to conflict with your friends or co-workers.

What will happen if you don't do it? Maybe the best choice is to simply decide not to do it. If that's the case, throw away the card! It's your life, so you get to decide.

What is the optimal outcome? Some endeavors have no good outcome. If you have to share some bad news, will the experience get better or worse by postponing?

Have you been here before? What is familiar? How did you get out of the situation last time? Looking back at previous challenges and successful patterns that pulled you out of the challenge could provide great insights into your current situation. Or what could you change this time to get out of the rut?

And then what happens? If you are worried about the consequences of doing something, ask yourself what those consequences are. And then what? What if you don't do it? And then what? Often the fear of the consequence is worse than the actual consequence. Letting go of the fear lets you move forward.

Who can help? Maybe someone with the right expertise could help you. Maybe someone who is blocking you could become an ally.

Finally, just visualizing your progress (or lack thereof) can help you build up your resolve to overcome procrastination. Piyali shares how visualization helped her move past procrastination.

“As I visualize my Priorities Map and my prioritized task list, I can keep in mind the most important tasks and I think “What is the most important work for me in this moment?” “What is important of all the things I could do?” And I am able to review my done list, like a retrospective and see what I have planned, what I have completed and what is in the pending list. If there is something urgent that I need to do now, then I start to do it now or I move it back to the backlog overall list. I compare my work to my bandwidth and available time of what all I can accomplish in this timebox of a week and make my board visible so I can see it.”

“When I went through the Personal Agility course and attended the weekly calls, I realized the fear will be always there. Fear of getting out of my comfort zone. Fear of failure. If it is really important for me then I have to accomplish it. Pushing past the fear gets you to where you want to be.”

Once you become aware of your habits and patterns and recognize this, you can get better at choosing where you spend your time and you can choose things that get you closer to your ultimate goals.

V - Try this at home: Staying in Flow

As you do the Celebrate and Choose on weekly (or even daily) basis, look at what you got done. Does it align with what really matters? Look at what you chose to do for the upcoming week. Do your choices align with what really matters? If you find yourself distracted, multitasking or procrastinating, here is what you can do:

Pat yourself on the back for recognizing the situation!
Awareness is a big thing.

Remind yourself what you *want* to accomplish.

If that is hard to do, try asking yourself:

- What is making this hard?
- What am I afraid of?
- What is a small step that I can accomplish today?
- Who can help? (get help, delegate, or outsource the task.)
- Place the *next small step* on the top of your “This Week” column.
- Give yourself an extra high-five when you get done!

Also use this process if you are stumped by an unexpected disruption or if an unexpected opportunity presents itself.

*“The wind that blows your boat off-course
is the same wind that you can use to get your
boat back on-course”
– Maria Matarelli*

Thank you for reading!

What do you think? What resonates?
What doesn't? Join the community to
share your thoughts and ask us questions!

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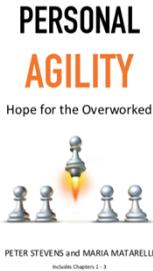
Please share your feedback by

March 24, 2019

so we can incorporate your thoughts in the final
version of the book.

Thanks!
Peter and Maria

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Personal Agility is a simple framework that helps you do more that matters.

It is like a GPS for your life. It helps you identify your priorities, stay on track with your goals, and focus on doing more of what is important to you rather than just getting more things done.

This book is for anyone who wants to get into the driver's seat of their life.

It will show you how to get better at beating procrastination and getting things done, recovering from distractions, building agreement with those around you, prioritizing and not wasting time on things that aren't important to you.

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- Stakeholder Canvas (2 copies)
- 2 sheets of 104 colored sticky dots each
- 3 pads of 100 sticky notes each
- Guide to Personal Agility
- The Quick Start Guide



Learn from Peter and Maria!

For leaders, managers, coaches, consultants, and project leaders who want better alignment with themselves and more impact at work. Would you like to?



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“Thanks to Personal Agility, I can finish each week with satisfaction and start each week with confidence” — Walter Stulzer, Executive Director, Futureworks AG

“After one week of Personal Agility with Peter, I was able to shift my priorities and change my actions to better serve myself and my company.” — Joerg Ewald, Managing Director, Volirium AG

“Personal Agility is the USB Plug of agile frameworks.” — John Badgley, New York, Business Agility Coach

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